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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses problems in community colleges and provides suggestions for rectifying them. High dropout rates, low funds, general lethargy and discouragement, and faculty burnout pose great challenges to colleges in this nation. Possible suggestions to remedy the situation include: involving faculty more in change-oriented activities; encouraging faculty to develop greater linkages with community resources; updating and enhancing the teaching environment; changing the academic calendar to provide more flexibility and opportunities for faculty; providing incentives to faculty to reward effective teaching; professionalizing teaching in the eyes of the public; and providing more opportunities for employee-assistance type programs for teachers. Perhaps the most important step is to accept the faculty as full partners and colleagues and listen to valuable suggestions they may offer. Adopting these simple suggestions may help chart a path in the direction of real education reform. (YKH)

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Community Colleges: Quo Vadis ?

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All of us are well aware of the series of challenges facing our community colleges in this nation. Actually they aren't "challenges" -- they are down right "problems". Not insurmountable ones -- but serious enough obstacles to be properly termed problems. They are problems!

Let us summarize them. Drop out rates among students are high, fresh funds for capital improvements are scarce, enrollments are up and funding is down. The combination of those deadly elements hamper the initiative and innovation that have historically characterized community colleges.

Lethargy and a sense of discouragement, heretofore unknown at most community colleges, is creeping in and affecting our faculty and administrators alike.

Why is this happening? Are our colleges failing to live up to our expectations because of internal or external factors? Has society changed? What should we realistically expect our colleges to be doing that they aren't now? The lack of rational objective analysis of these issues hampers our ability to know what to do.

Our first instinct might prompt us to look for basic causes. Colleges financing policies and the structural deficiencies that presently exist in our educational institutions comes to mind.

Certainly California, Florida and other well-known community college pioneer states have seen dramatic fiscal reductions in the past few years. In some states tuition has increased so much that the creaking open door has slammed shut for many who could benefit from our services. But to blame everything on finances is extremely simplistic and carries the danger of trivializing and politicizing the question. The root problem goes beyond proper financing.

We suggest we remember what Lincoln once said "No matter how narrow a board may be it still has two sides." The seeds of the solution we seek lie within our colleges. I suggest we listen to the very persons who far too many people are ready to criticize. The very same ones that are all too often ignored -- our faculty. It is ironic how often their suggestions are not solicited and if by miracle they surface, they are ignored.

Why does our profession time and time again ignore the opinions of these key individuals? It is not true of other professions. Why is it true of us? Who would afford credibility to health research studies if medical professionals were not involved; to a financial audit if qualified accountants were not employed; or to an analysis of building safety if we did not use the skills of competent structural experts?

We are seeing much too often, an increase in faculty turnover, a loss of teaching productivity, and an excessive amount of frustration and contentiousness between instructors and their administrative colleagues. Too much energy is being dispersed in raucous disputes. Our focus is being diverted away from our major goals. Let me suggest that our failure to include faculty in a meaningful fashion may lie at the root of many of our problems.

It's time to examine the strengths and weaknesses of our educational system and let's have teaching professionals form the center of our study. One of the most critical issues that would emerge and thus could be addressed in this process would be the growth of faculty burnout. It is deliberating and wide spread.

Our libraries are full of good studies that verify the existence of the problem. Let's go one step further. Let's study both the causes and potential remedies for addressing burnout. For example, we need to ask teachers their opinion on the reasons for their negative feelings toward teaching in our colleges. What other aspects of their week to week existence frustrates them?

Is it of recent vintage? Why the rising level of dissatisfaction? It is less than adequate compensation levels, poor working conditions, lack of teacher involvement in the decisions that are made? Or have communication difficulties

within our colleges stymied us? In short, what has led to the burnout and what can be done to turn it around? We need to determine what can we do to help alleviate the factors that lead to burnout.

These are all good and important questions, and there are many others that could be advanced by our faculty. Part of the process would be to create a profile of instructors who are the most and least likely burnout victims. Such as analysis would help in setting up an "early warning" process to help faculty who are drifting toward serious burnout. On the basis of this new data we could build a plan to help them rejuvenate themselves. Beyond that, we could devise better student recruitment and screening procedures, we could establish effective in - service professional development programs. We could also cull data to share with universities that train our teachers.

But at the present, there is a disconnect at several levels. Sometimes our faculties feel like piano players in a marching band. They don't quite fit. They certainly don't have control over what is happening around them and they are overwhelmed. That feeling of alienation is counterproductive.

Part of the frustration comes from having to work with constricting and at times conflicting regulations. Too many rules and not enough opportunities to affect change. General George Patton once said, "Never tell people how to do things -- tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."

In the area of "what should be done to address burnout," we should at least be asking faculty if the following changes would help:

- Having faculty more involved in change-*oriented activities*, such as curriculum reforms, governance, and other leadership assignments. Establishing faculty internships in administrative positions. Let them experience first hand the limitations administrators face every day. Currently all administrators should periodically teach, some on a full time basis. Respect and admiration for each others daily world will better working relationships for all.

- Encourage faculty to develop greater *linkages with community resources*. These are a host of competent individuals and useful programs beyond our colleges that could help all of us be most effective, more fulfilled. Community college teachers normally are more involved in the community than other higher education teachers. But they should re- focus and do more.

- Update and *enhance the teaching environment* -- such as better

layout of classrooms, and improved use of audio visuals and instructional technologies. Administrators must take the lead here. By word and by action they must help teachers experiment and take chances to reach more students.

- Changing the *academic calendar* to a new configuration with more opportunities for short courses, community seminars, retreats, and other opportunities. More than any other sector of higher education, community colleges have been receptive to the time constraints of our students. Most work, most have family obligations, most have full lives beyond the classroom. Yet many of us now opt universities. We are constricting our calendar, our office hours and offerings. It places undo pressures on our students which in turn alienates them from the faculty. Hardly the best environment for job satisfaction.

- Providing *greater incentives to faculty* to reward effective teaching and constructive community service. We keep saying we are "teaching oriented", but do we really reward good teaching? How? There are many motivational forces -- but money remains an important one. And what of faculty that are not doing well? Do we provide them a series of non-threatening opportunities to become better teachers?

- *Professionalizing teaching in the eyes of the public* through efforts that demonstrate the vital contributions educators make in our economy and in promoting a better quality life. Teachers were once the most respected of all professions. Why have we lost so much prestige? For a vocal segment of our population, we are horribly reticent and quiet when it comes to tooting our own horn.

- Providing *more opportunities for employee - assistance type programs* for teachers. Administrators aren't the only persons who need personal, career counseling and financial planning. Participation in ongoing support groups would help as well.

Summary

These are but a few suggestions. But perhaps the most important suggestion for administrators, Boards, and others who impact the flow in community colleges is that we must accept the faculty as full partners in our colleges. They are not employees, they are colleagues. Colleagues should be encouraged to use the talents they possess and contribute to all aspects of our college. We have to listen to them, accept and adopt what we can, fully explain what we cannot.

All suggestions would not be stellar. Some ideas would be great -- some would not be. But if honestly solicited and seriously considered, the healthy dialogue would begin. The woods

would be very silent if no birds sang except those that sang perfectly the first time around.

Adoption of these simple suggestions will help chart a path in the direction of real education reform -- a reform that strikes at the heart of the most critical aspect of our educational system, the legitimate needs of our faculty.

Let's tackle the burnout problem head-on before the crisis in our community colleges attacks our sense of reason, and our will to pursue new directions.